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ABSTRACT

The widespread disenchantment with public education can be understood by looking at studies and official statements made in recent years. Demographic studies clearly indicate that the population is getting older; older citizens on fixed incomes seek alternatives to the costs of education. In addition, fewer births and the resulting enrollment decline mean that taxpayers will demand quality education with the least amount of financial burden. These factors, along with the technological revolution that is transforming an industrial society into an information society, could result in decentralizing learning experiences to each home. Statements critical of public education have been made by prominent persons including the President of the United States and James Coleman. Finally, a number of state legislatures have enacted bills that continue to drain the public school treasury. To meet these challenges, supporters of public education must communicate broadly its many virtues. Public education is unique in having large numbers of experienced, dedicated, and talented educators; superior physical facilities; comprehensive programs and services; and heterogeneous student population. Educators should also help draft state legislation, promote cooperation among school districts, and communicate successes more effectively to the general public. (MLF)

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THE CHALLENGES OF THE EIGHTIES

MATTHEW W. COSTANZO

Paper presented at a meeting of the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association, October 1982.

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THE CHALLENGES OF THE EIGHTIES

WILL PUBLIC EDUCATION AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT TO OPERATE FOR THESE MANY YEARS FACE A BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL IN THE YEARS IMMEDIATELY AHEAD? IS IT REALLY ARMAGEDDON OR JUST ANOTHER SKIRMISH THAT CONFRONTS THOSE OF US WHO ARE COMMITTED TO PUBLIC EDUCATION?

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CRITICS WHO SOUGHT TO REFORM THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN OUR COUNTRY. BUT LATELY THEIR STRATEGIES HAVE CHANGED DRAMATICALLY. THE CRITICS NO LONGER SEEM CONTENT TO SUGGEST REFORMS. THEY APPEAR BENT UPON DISMANTLING THE INSTITUTION WE LABEL "THE PUBLIC SCHOOL."

CRITICS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION ARE VEHEMENTLY ATTACKING THE ENTIRE SYSTEM AS BEING MONOLITHIC, ANACHRONISTIC, TOO EXPENSIVE AND TOTALLY INEFFICIENT! THEY SEE NO HOPE FOR TRANSFORMING THIS INSTITUTION INTO AN EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT FOR EDUCATING FUTURE GENERATIONS OF AMERICAN YOUTHS.

CRITICS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION ARE NOW DEMANDING ALTERNATIVES TO THE PRESENT SYSTEM. THEY ARE NUDGING LEGISLATORS AT EVERY LEVEL TO CONSIDER SUCH ALTERNATIVES AS TUITION TAX CREDIT PLANS FOR PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN ATTEND NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS. THEY ARE PROPOSING VOUCHER PLANS THAT WOULD GIVE ALL PARENTS A CERTIFICATE TO CASH IN AT ANY SCHOOL OF THEIR CHOICE WHETHER IT BE PUBLIC, PRIVATE OR PAROCHIAL. THEY ARE DEMANDING THAT THEIR TAX DOLLARS PROVIDE MORE OPTIONS FOR EDUCATING THEIR CHILDREN THAN ARE NOW OPEN TO THEM.

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WHAT HAS CAUSED SUCH WIDESPREAD DISENCHANTMENT AND DISILLUSIONMENT WITH A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION THAT ONCE WAS THE ENVY OF THE ENTIRE CIVILIZED WORLD? WHY ARE TAXPAYERS EVERYWHERE SEEMINGLY IN A STATE OF RESURRECTION AGAINST PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS?

FOR ANSWERS TO THESE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS, WE MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE A LOOK AT THE POLLS, THE SURVEYS AND THE STUDIES THAT HAVE BEEN MADE IN RECENT YEARS. WHAT FOLLOWS MAY BE STRICTLY CONJECTURE--ONE MAN'S OPINION, PERHAPS--BUT I OFFER THESE PERCEPTIONS FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION.

ITEM: WE ARE GETTING OLDER

THE DEMOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF OUR NATION AND REGION CLEARLY INDICATE THAT WE ARE GETTING OLDER--ON THE AVERAGE--WITH EACH PASSING YEAR.

IN 1947, WHEN OUR SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM WAS IN ITS INFANCY, THERE WERE THIRTY-FIVE (35) WAGE EARNERS TO EACH PERSON ON SOCIAL SECURITY.

TODAY, THAT RATIO HAS BEEN CUT TO THREE (3) WAGE EARNERS PER EACH PERSON ON SOCIAL SECURITY.

BY 1990, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT OUR POPULATION WILL CONTAIN MORE PEOPLE OVER 55 YEARS OF AGE THAN THOSE WHO WILL BE OF SCHOOL AGE. SHOULD THIS TRANSPIRE, IT WILL MARK THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY WHEN OUR SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION WILL BE LESS THAN THOSE APPROACHING MIDDLE AGE AND BEYOND.

WE HAVE ALREADY EXPERIENCED THAT THIS INCREASINGLY OLDER POPULATION IS FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO IDENTIFY--TO RELATE--TO SUPPORT OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS. FROM THOSE WHO ARE IN THE TWILIGHT OF THEIR LIVES--ALL OF WHOM ARE BATTLING THE RAVAGES OF INFLATION--MANY OF WHOM ARE ON FIXED INCOMES--SOME OF WHOM HAVE HAD NO CONTACT WITH PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN YEARS--FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IS A DRAIN AND A HARDSHIP THEY NO LONGER CHOOSE TO ENDURE. CONSEQUENTLY, THIS GROUP OF CITIZENS BECOMES A PRIME TARGET FOR THOSE WHO WOULD SEEK ALTERNATIVES TO THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION.

ITEM: OUR VALUES ARE CHANGING

WHAT ELSE DO THE STUDIES AND SURVEYS SHOW? THEY SHOW CLEARLY THAT OUR SOCIAL VALUES AND STANDARDS ARE CHANGING RATHER DRAMATICALLY.

THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT HAS ASSIGNED NEW ROLES TO MEN AS WELL AS WOMEN. AND THE CHANGING ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN OUR SOCIETY HAVE NOT ONLY INFLUENCED EMPLOYMENT TRENDS BUT ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, CONTRACEPTION AND FAMILY SIZE AS WELL. THESE NEWLY ESTABLISHED VALUES HAVE RESULTED IN:

... FEWER BIRTHS

... SMALLER FAMILIES

... DECLINING STUDENT ENROLLMENTS

THE BABY BOOM OF THE FIFTIES AND EARLY SIXTIES HAS TURNED INTO THE BABY BUST OF THE SEVENTIES. AND THUS--PUBLIC EDUCATION HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A DECLINING INDUSTRY FROM THE ROBUST, DYNAMIC INDUSTRY OF 25 TO 30 YEARS AGO. THE SOUND OF BULLDOZERS CLEARING SITES FOR SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION HAS BEEN MUTED AND FINALLY SILENCED. AND SCHOOLS THAT ONCE RESOUNDED WITH THE LAUGHTER OF CHILDREN AT WORK AND AT PLAY ARE NOW SILENT, SHUTTERED MONUMENTS OF THE PAST.

RETRENCHMENT IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY. FEW SCHOOL DISTRICTS WILL BE SPARED THE TAXPAYERS' DEMANDS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION WITH THE LEAST AMOUNT OF FINANCIAL BURDEN.

ITEM: FROM BLUE COLLAR TO WHITE COLLAR

AND WHILE THESE SOCIAL CHANGES ARE OCCURRING, WE SIMULTANEOUSLY FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF A TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION THAT IS TRANSFORMING OUR SOCIETY INTO AN INFORMATION SOCIETY FROM ITS PRE-EMINENCE AS AN INDUSTRIALIZED SOCIETY. WITH EVERY PASSING YEAR--MORE AND MORE AMERICANS ARE EXCHANGING BLUE COLLARS FOR WHITE COLLARS.

ONE OF OUR LATEST SURVEYS SHOWED THAT OVER ONE-HALF OF OUR GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT WAS RELATED TO JOBS AND PROFESSIONS THAT DEALT WITH THE:

... GATHERING OF INFORMATION
... STORING OF INFORMATION
... TRANSCRIBING OF INFORMATION
... RETRIEVING OF INFORMATION
... ANALYZING OF INFORMATION
... PACKAGING OF INFORMATION
... DISTRIBUTING OF INFORMATION

CARRIED TO ITS ULTIMATE SCENARIO, THIS TRANSFORMATION COULD TAKE THE HUMAN FACTOR OUT OF LEARNING--COULD DECENTRALIZE LEARNING EXPERIENCES TO EACH HOME THROUGH THE PROLIFERATION OF HOUSEHOLD COMPUTERS, IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL TV PROGRAMMING, CASSETTES, DISCS AND OTHER LEARNING MEDIA. WILL WE ULTIMATELY REPLACE THE HIGHLY PERSONALIZED TEACHING EXPERIENCE--AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT--FOR MACHINES? SOUND FAR-FETCHED? SO DID SCIENCE FICTION OF NOT SO MANY YEARS AGO--FICTION THAT HAD EARTHLINGS TRAVELING TO OUTER SPACE AND EVENTUALLY RETURNING TO THIS PLANET.

ITEM: JAMES COLEMAN IS BACK

YOU, OF COURSE, REMEMBER JAMES COLEMAN, THE RESEARCHER WHO SPARKED THE INTEGRATION EFFORTS OF THE SIXTIES--THE JAMES COLEMAN WHO WONDERED OUT LOUD WHETHER SCHOOLS MADE ANY DIFFERENCE AT ALL FOR MOST CHILDREN. WELL, JAMES COLEMAN IS BACK WITH STILL ANOTHER REPORT ENTITLED, "PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS." PREDICTABLY, MR. COLEMAN APPLAUDS THE SUPERIORITY OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

NO MATTER THAT COLEMAN HAS BEEN WRONG BEFORE--NO MATTER THAT HE HAS HAD TO UTTER A FEW MEA CULPAS DURING HIS CAREER. COLEMAN'S IS A VOICE THAT IS NOT ONLY HEARD BUT LISTENED TO. THERE ARE THOSE WHO CHARGE THAT, THIS TIME AROUND, COLEMAN HAS BEEN INSPIRED BY THE TUITION TAX CREDIT AND VOUCHER PLAN ENTHUSIASTS. PERHAPS. BUT RATHER THAN GET UP TIGHT OVER HIS REPORT, I WOULD PREFER TO ACCEPT IT AS A CHALLENGE.

AFTER ALL--WHAT HAS COLEMAN RECENTLY CONCLUDED ABOUT PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

... THAT THEY OFFER A MORE DISCIPLINED ENVIRONMENT

... THAT THEY GET BETTER RESULTS IN COGNITIVE SKILLS

... THAT THEY GENERATE MORE SELF-ESTEEM IN STUDENTS

... THAT THEY CREATE A FEELING OF "FAMILY" OR "COMMUNITY"

THESE ARE ADMIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SCHOOL OR SCHOOL SYSTEM. BUT THESE CHARACTERISTICS ARE VERY MUCH IN EVIDENCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS, TOO--SYSTEMS THAT HAVE RESPONSIVE SCHOOL BOARDS AND ALERT, DEDICATED STAFF MEMBERS.

I MIGHT ADD THAT PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS ALSO PROVIDE A FULL RANGE OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND A BETTER SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND RACIAL MIX OF STUDENTS...PERHAPS A BETTER MILIEU FOR MEETING LIFE'S CHALLENGES...THAN DO OUR NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL COUNTERPARTS.

AND WHILE THESE TRENDS ARE DEVELOPING, OTHER MAJOR EVENTS ARE OCCURRING:

ITEM: THE AMERICAN PUBLIC OVERWHELMINGLY ELECTED A PRESIDENT WHO CAMPAIGNED ON THE ABOLISHMENT OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION / ESTABLISHMENT OF A TUITION TAX CREDIT PLAN / AND REDUCTION IN FEDERAL AID TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

ITEM: ONE STATE LEGISLATURE AFTER ANOTHER ENACTS BILL AFTER BILL IN SUPPORT OF NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS--BILLS THAT PROVIDE AN ARRAY OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT INCLUDE TRANSPORTATION, SPECIAL EDUCATION, REMEDIATION AND OTHER ANCILLARY SERVICES FOR NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS. BILLS THAT CONTINUE TO DRAIN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL TREASURY.

ITEM: IT WAS PROPOSITION 13 IN CALIFORNIA AND PROPOSITION 2½ IN MASSACHUSETTS. OTHER STATES HAVE FOLLOWED THE LEAD IN PLACING CAPS ON SPENDING OR TAXES. BUT THE END RESULT IS ALWAYS THE SAME--LESS AND LESS MONEY AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

ITEM: THE PRESIDENT OF THE U. S. HIMSELF AND OTHER VERY PERSUASIVE PERSONALITIES OFFICIALLY INTRODUCED THE ALTERNATIVES OF TUITION TAX CREDITS AND/OR VOUCHER PLANS FOR THE CONVENTIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS. THEY SEE THESE ALTERNATIVES AS MEANS FOR RELIEVING SOME MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES OF THEIR "DOUBLE BURDEN" FOR EDUCATION. THEY SEE PRIVATE AND PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS AS VIABLE ALTERNATIVES AND OPTIONS FOR PARENTS. EVERY EFFORT IS BEING MADE TO SUSTAIN NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

THERE ARE BOTH PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRAGMATIC REBUTTALS TO THE ARGUMENTS FOR TUITION TAX CREDITS AND VOUCHER PLANS--PERHAPS TOO NUMEROUS TO DISCUSS HERE. MAY IT SUFFICE TO SAY THAT BOTH PLANS MUST OVERCOME CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES. BOTH PLANS WILL CHANNEL MONEY AWAY FROM PUBLIC EDUCATION. BOTH PLANS MUST ADDRESS THE SEGREGATIONIST ASPECTS INHERENT IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION. AND ON, AND ON.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

FOR SAKE OF DISCUSSION, LET US ASSUME THAT TUITION TAX CREDIT PROPOSALS AND/OR VOUCHER PLANS ARE IMPLEMENTED IN THIS DECADE. WHAT SHOULD BE THE RESPONSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATORS AND OTHER PROPONENTS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

I SUGGEST THAT WE MUST DO MORE THAN OFFER PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRAGMATIC REBUTTALS OR GO ABOUT WRINGING OUR HANDS IN DESPAIR. I SUGGEST INSTEAD THAT WE BEGIN NOW--IMMEDIATELY--TO COMMUNICATE BROADLY THE MANY VIRTUES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION--AND WE HAVE MANY.

WE HAVE: THE STAFF

AN OVERWHELMING NUMBER OF EXPERIENCED, TALENTED, DEDICATED EDUCATORS...THE BEST AVAILABLE IN MANY INSTANCES

WE HAVE: SUPERIOR FACILITIES

OUR PHYSICAL FACILITIES IN MANY CASES ARE VASTLY SUPERIOR TO THOSE OFFERED BY MANY PRIVATE AND PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS.

WE HAVE: COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

EVEN JAMES COLEMAN ADMITS THAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS OFFER MORE COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAN OUR NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL COUNTERPARTS... PROGRAMS THAT SERVE THE NEEDS, INTERESTS AND EXCEPTIONALITIES OF EVERY CHILD.

WE HAVE: HETEROGENEOUS STUDENT POPULATIONS

OUR NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL COMPETITORS--AND THAT IS WHAT THEY ARE IN THESE DAYS OF DWINDLING STUDENT POPULATIONS--CANNOT MATCH THE RACIAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC MIX THAT CHARACTERIZES MOST PUBLIC SCHOOL POPULATIONS. THIS IS NO SMALL CONSIDERATION IF YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THE NOTION THAT STUDENTS LEARN BEST FROM EACH OTHER.

THESE INGREDIENTS NEED ONLY TO BE BLENDED AND SHAPED. AND WHEN THEY ARE, PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL AGAIN OFFER A MAGNIFICENT CRUCIBLE FOR LEARNING. IN SO DOING...

WE NEED TO: RECAPTURE OUR COMPETITIVE EDGE

WE CAN NO LONGER ASSUME THAT WE ARE IMMUNE TO ATTACKS FROM WITHOUT OR THAT WE HAVE A MONOPOLY ON THE TAX DOLLAR.

WE NEED TO: END BOTH THE HISTORIC AND MORE RECENTLY DEVELOPED ADVERSARIAL RELATIONSHIPS

NO LONGER CAN WE ALLOW THE INTRA-SCHOOL AND INTER-SCHOOL DISTRICT FEUDING THAT HAS ASSUMED DAMAGING PROPORTIONS IN RECENT YEARS. WITH EACH ATTACK UPON EACH OTHER--PUBLIC CONFIDENCE, TRUST AND COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IS DIMINISHED ACCORDINGLY.

WE NEED TO: BECOME LEGISLATIVE ENGINEERS

THERE ARE REPRESENTATIVES IN THE STATE CAPITOL WHO WOULD HELP US--AND THEY AWAIT OUR PROPOSALS THAT WOULD FURTHER PUBLIC EDUCATION. WE SHOULD HELP THEM DRAFT LEGISLATION. TOO OFTEN WE REACT TO LEGISLATION PROPOSED BY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS. OUR EFFORTS ARE OFTEN TOO LITTLE AND TOO LATE--AND PUBLIC EDUCATION SUFFERS ACCORDINGLY.

WE NEED TO: PROMOTE INTER-SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATION

MANY OF OUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE SMALL AND GETTING SMALLER. YET, WE ARE EXPECTED TO PROVIDE AN EVER-GROWING RANGE OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES. THE COORDINATION OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AMONG THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF A COUNTY OR I.U. COULD LEAD TO MORE EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT AND REDUCED COSTS TO OUR TAXPAYERS.

THIS IS A FERTILE FIELD THAT INCLUDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR COORDINATION IN:

... CONSTRUCTION OF A COMMON CALENDAR

... TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

... IN-SERVICE PROGRAMMING

... DATA PROCESSING

... PURCHASING

... LEGISLATION

... MAGNET AND/OR ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

... RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

... LABOR RELATIONS

... CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS...AND

... A MYRIAD OF OTHER ENDEAVORS

INTER-SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATION--PARTICULARLY THROUGH THE CONSORTIUM APPROACH--CAN WIDEN THE SCOPE OF OUR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AT MINIMAL COST TO THE TAXPAYERS. AT THE SAME TIME, LOCAL AUTONOMY IS PRESERVED AND OUR STUDENTS AND PARENTS NEED NOT LOOK BEYOND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO SATISFY THEIR EVERY NEED AND INTEREST

---AND PERHAPS MOST OF ALL---

WE NEED TO: COMMUNICATE OUR SUCCESSES MORE EFFECTIVELY

THERE IS MUCH THAT IS GOOD ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION. WE NEED TO MAKE A SPECIAL EFFORT TO COMMUNICATE THOSE SUCCESSES TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN A CONSISTENT, POSITIVE MANNER. WE NEED TO DO THIS AS INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND AS A COALITION OF ALL WHO ARE INTERESTED IN THE SURVIVAL OF PUBLIC EDUCATION.

I TRULY BELIEVE THAT WE CAN PROVIDE THE BEST EDUCATION POSSIBLE AT THE LEAST COST. WE NEED ONLY TO GET OUR ACT TOGETHER!

Matthew W. Costanzo, Ed.D.
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